

# PRAYING TO SAINTS

## ISN'T THERE ONLY ONE MEDIATOR?

A charge commonly leveled against asking the saints for their intercession is that this violates the sole mediatorship of Christ, which Paul discusses: “For there is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus” (*I Tim. 2:5*).

The following passage is also brought forth: “No one comes to the Father but through Me” (*Jn 14:6*).

## One necessary Mediator and many intercessors

First, Christ is a unique mediator between man and God because He is the only person who is both God and man. He is the only bridge between the two, the only God-man. He is the Lamb of God whose very sacrifice reconciled man back to God satisfying the penalty of eternal damnation sin brings. Furthermore, Christ is a unique mediator between God and man because he is the Mediator of the New Covenant (*Heb. 9:15, 12:24*), just as Moses was the mediator of the Old Covenant (*Gal. 3:19–20*).

The saints’ intercession clearly does not interfere with Christ’s unique mediatorship because in the four verses immediately preceding *I Timothy 2:5*, Paul says that Christians should intercede: “I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for all men, for kings and all who are in high positions, that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life, godly and respectful in every way. This is good and pleasing to God our Savior, who desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth” (*I Tim. 2:1–4*).

This shows that in order to have men saved, God wants us to pray and supplicate for them. This indeed is *good and pleasing* to Him.

In the book of Job (*Job 33:21-26*), we have an *example of an angel* acting as a mediator for a man who is about to die from sickness and sin and yet by the angel’s mediation the man is restored to his health and his righteous state, and God has mercy on the man who was spared death.

Jesus said that those who die in Christ are transformed and will be like the Angels in heaven (*Mt 22:30*). That implies glorified and perfected heavenly Saints will, like Angels, be ministering spirits to the people of God on earth struggling in this life (*Heb. 1:14*).

The Epistle to the Hebrews perfectly reflects and confirms all this:

“But you have come to... the city of the living God... and to innumerable angels... and to the assembly of the first-born who are enrolled in heaven, and to a judge who is God... and to the spirits of just men made perfect... and to Jesus” (*Heb. 12:22-24*). In the same way that we come to God and Jesus, we also come to the angels, our brothers and sisters on this earth in the Church, and to the spirits of just men made perfect, the saints in heaven. We come to them all by way of prayer.

## Why not directly to Jesus?

Some may grant that it is ok to pray to saints, but wonder: why not pray directly to Jesus?

Well, let us remember the teaching on the Mystical Body of Christ.

The Church is Christ’s body (*Rom. 12; Eph. 2:34*) or, in Our Lord’s words, branches of Him who is the vine (*Jn 15:1-5*). In fact, we are so radically one with Christ that He can say in *Acts 9:4*: “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute *Me*?” and in *Matthew 25:40*: “Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to *Me*”.

As Christ’s members, we also are individually parts of one another (*Rom. 12:4-5*). As we saw in *I Timothy 2:1–4*, Paul strongly encouraged Christians to intercede for many different things, and that passage is by no means unique in his writings. Elsewhere Paul directly asks others to pray for him: “Through the charity of the Spirit, help me by your prayers” (*Rom. 15:30–32*; see also *Eph. 6:18–20, Col. 4:3, I Thess. 5:25, II Thess. 3:1*), and he assured them that he was praying

for them as well (*II Thess. 1:11*). Most fundamentally, Jesus Himself required us to pray for others, and not only for those who asked us to do so but even for our enemies (*Mt 5:44*).

Now turn to *I Corinthians 12:12-27*. This is the text that refers to Christians as “the body of Christ”. We are so intimately one with one another that in verse 21, the text reads: “The eye cannot say to the hand: ‘I have no need of you’, nor again the head to the feet: ‘I have no need of you’”.

Since the practice of asking others to pray for us is so highly recommended in Scripture, *it cannot be regarded as superfluous* on the grounds that one can go directly to Jesus. This is how God has designed His kingdom so that not only are we dependent on God but also on each other and especially on those glorified saints who have departed the earth to receive their eternal inheritance and rewards.

Protestants reject invocations to saints based on their wrong conception of justification. Accordingly, he who believes in Christ is covered by Christ’s justification and becomes as holy and perfect as any other believer. Therefore he does not need the help of anyone but Christ’s.

Now, this is totally un-Biblical. The following passages of Scripture show that some are closer friends of God than others and as a consequence, God rejects or listens favorably to their prayers.

“The victims of the wicked are abominable to the Lord: the vows of the just are acceptable” (*Prov. 15:8*).

“The Lord is far from the wicked: and he will hear the prayers of the just” (*Prov. 15:29*).

“When you stretch forth your hands, I will turn away my eyes from you: and when you multiply prayer, I will not hear: for your hands are full of blood” (*Isaiah 1:15*).

“Husbands, dwell with your wives considerately, paying honor to the woman as to the weaker vessel, and as to co-heir of the grace of life, that your prayers be not hindered” (*I Pet. 3:7*).

“I see how stiff-necked this people is, said the Lord to Moses. Let me alone, then, that my wrath may blaze up against them to consume them... But Moses implored the Lord, his God, saying: ‘Why, O Lord?... Let your blazing wrath die down; relent in punishing your people. Remember your servants Abraham, Isaac and Israel, and how you swore to them by your own self, saying: ‘I will make your descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky...’ So the Lord relented in the punishment he had threatened to inflict on his people” (*Exodus 32:9-14*).

“This request you have just made I will carry out, because you have found favor with Me and you are My intimate friend” (*Exodus 34:17*).

“The prayer of a righteous man has great power in its effects. Elias was a man of like nature with ourselves and he prayed fervently that it might not rain, and for three years and six months it did not rain on the earth. Then he prayed again and the heaven gave rain, and the earth brought forth its fruit” (*James 5:16–18. See also Jer. 18:20*).

Now, think of this: those Christians in heaven are more righteous than anyone on earth, since they have been made perfect to stand in God’s presence (*Heb. 12:22-23*); which means that their *prayers* are *more efficacious*.

God has given us a great heavenly host to help us on our earthly journey. Therefore, to claim one does not need to pray to saints is a form of pride and it dishonors God who wishes us to pass through them.

Of course we should also pray directly to Our Lord with every pressing need we have (*see Jn 14:13–14*). In fact, the prayers of the Mass, the central act of Catholic worship, are directed to God the Father and Our Lord, not the saints. But this does not mean that we should not also ask our fellow Christians, including those in heaven, to pray with us and for us.

Ultimately, the “go-directly-to-Jesus” objection boomerangs back on the one who makes it: why should we ask any Christian, in heaven or on earth, to pray for us when we can ask Jesus directly?

## **WHY TALK TO DEAD PEOPLE?**

### **Alive and still members of the Mystical Body of Christ**

Sometimes Fundamentalists object to asking our fellow Christians in heaven to pray for us by declaring that God has forbidden contact with the dead in passages such as *Deuteronomy 18:10-11*.

Anyone who argues that praying to a Saint is praying to a dead person doesn’t understand what Jesus has taught us:

“Have you not read what God said to you: ‘I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob’? *He is not the God of the dead but of the living*” (Mt 22: 30-32). (St. Luke’s Gospel 20:38 adds “for to Him all are alive”). Now if God is the God of the living and not the God of the dead, then how can Catholics be praying to dead people? Even though Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob each experienced a physical death Jesus said they are indeed alive.

Let us further examine the words of Jesus on the matter: “Jesus said to her: “I am the resurrection and the life. *He who believes in me will live, even though he dies; and whoever lives and believes in me will never die.* Do you believe this?” (Jn 11:25-26) Apparently Protestants do not since they want to make the argument that we Catholics pray to dead people!

Jesus Himself spoke with both Moses and Elias even though Moses was dead and buried for over a thousand years and Elias was taken up into heaven nearly a thousand years before Jesus was born. Jesus is our very example of Christian living. Therefore, if He spoke with departed Saints and the Bible commands us to walk as Jesus did (I Jn 2:3-6) there is no reason why we can’t speak with Saints who have overcome the world and have been perfected and glorified.

In *Jeremiah 31:15-16*, we see Rachel interceding for Israel hundreds of years after her death: “Her voice was heard” and her prayers were answered.

There is no real distinction between the believer in human life and after human life. Saints, living or dead, are indistinguishable before God. As Scripture makes very clear, death does not separate us from the love of Christ (see *Romans 8:38-39*) and from His body, which is the Church (*Eph. 1:23; Col. 1:24*). They are, and we are, members of Christ’s body (*Gal. 3:28*). And there is only one body of Christ (*Rom. 12:5; Eph. 4:4; Col. 3:15*), not one on earth and one in heaven. When a Christian petitions in prayer, for prayer and aid from a glorified heavenly saint, he/she is communing with the saints which are still part of the body of Christ; this is no different then had they asked family and friends still here on earth to pray for them. The truly dead are forever separated from God but glorified Saints are not only, not separated from God but they are not separated from the body of Christ either! We may be bodily separated, but this does not keep us from honoring and loving our brothers and sisters and parents who have gone before us according to the Scripture’s command:

“Love one another with mutual affection” (*Rom. 12:10*).

“Bear one another’s burdens” (*Gal 6:12*).

“Let us do good to all, especially those in the family of faith” (*Gal 6:10*).

This intimate union with Christ and with one another does not cease when we die. In fact, it becomes more radical. Indeed, the saints in heaven are even closer to us than when they were here on earth, because it’s Christ who makes us one. They are free from all sin, which hinders our prayers (see *Mt 17:20, I Jn 3:22, Psalm 66:18*), and they are experiencing a union with God (and therefore with us) beyond anything we can fathom. “[They are] like Him for [they] see Him as He is” (*I Jn 3:2*). As “partakers of the divine nature” (*II Peter 1:4*) in the fullest sense, they have gifts and powers beyond what “eye has seen [or] ear heard” (*I Cor. 2:9*).

The saints, now perfected in righteousness in heaven (see *Heb. 12:23*), have been put in charge of “many things<sup>1</sup>” (*Mt 25:21*). If we could ask them to pray for us when they were here on earth, of course we can -and should- ask them to pray for us now.

### **Saints in heaven and angels are aware of our petitions**

Based on the following passage of Scripture: “He who has entered into his rest, has himself also rested from his own works, even as God did from His” (*Heb. 4:10*), Protestants at times object that the saints in heaven cannot possibly be bothered by all our petitions for help.

First of all, such an attitude on the part of the saints would be selfishness. But actually, this opinion lies on a very poor understanding of the eternal bliss. *Eternal bliss is not idleness*; it is a participation in God’s rest who, ceasing to create did not cease to act: “My Father works even until now, and I too work” (*Jn 5:17*).

Anti-Catholic Loraine Boettner goes further: “How can a human being such as Mary hear the prayers of millions of Roman Catholics, in many different countries, praying in many different languages, all at the same time? Let any priest or

layman try to converse with only three people at the same time and see how impossible that is for a human being... Many such petitions are expressed, not orally, but only mentally, silently. How can Mary and the saints, without being like God, be present everywhere and know the secrets of all hearts?" (*Roman Catholicism*, 142-143).

If being in heaven were like being in the next room, then of course these objections would be valid. A mortal, unglorified person in the next room would indeed suffer the restrictions imposed by the way space and time work in our universe. But the saints are not in the next room, and they are *not subject to the time/space limitations of this life*.

Scripture indicates that the glorified human intellect enjoyed by the saints in heaven has a *phenomenal ability to process information*, dwarfing anything we are capable of in this life. This is shown by the fact that, on Judgment Day, we will review every act of our lives. But since Judgment Day is not going to take eighty years to review the events of an eighty year life (if it takes any time at all), our intellects will be able to process enormous amounts of information and experience once freed from the confines of this mortal life. And not only will we be aware of the events of our own lives, but of the lives of those around us on Judgment Day as well, for Christ stated that all our acts will be publicly revealed (*Lk 12:2-3*).

This does not imply that the saints in heaven therefore must be omniscient as God is, for it is *only through God's willing* it that they can communicate with others in heaven or with us.

As for Boettner's argument about petitions arriving in different languages, it is even further off the mark. Does anyone really think that in heaven the saints are restricted to the King's English? After all, it is God Himself who gives *the gift of tongues* and the interpretation of tongues. Surely those saints in the Apocalypse understand the prayers they are shown to be offering to God.

The fact that Elias could come back from heaven and appear with Jesus on the Mount of Transfiguration shows that by the power of God saints have *capabilities that far surpass our limitations on earth*.

The problem here is one of what might be called a primitive or even childish and certainly un-Biblical view of heaven.

This is the way Scripture regards the knowledge of the deceased saints: "When the Lamb broke the fifth seal, I saw underneath the altar the souls of those who had been slain because of the word of God, and because of the testimony which they had maintained; and they cried out with a loud voice, saying: 'How long, O Lord, holy and true, will You refrain from judging and avenging our blood on those who dwell on the earth?' And there was given to each of them a white robe; and they were told that they should rest for a little while longer, until the number of their fellow servants and their brethren who were to be killed even as they had been, would be completed also" (*Apoc. 6:9-11*).

We notice here that the deceased saints, in their "soul" existence, both pray to God and are aware that the earth exists; that it still houses the evil people who killed them; and that their "fellow servants and brethren" are still on earth and would likewise be killed.

St. John writes: "The twenty-four elders fell down before the Lamb, each holding a harp, and with golden bowls full of incense, which are *the prayers of the saints*" (*Apoc. 5:8*).

Likewise, "an angel came and stood at the altar with a golden censer; and he was given much incense to mingle with *the prayers of all the saints* upon the golden altar before the throne; and the smoke of the incense rose with *the prayers of the saints* from the hand of the angel before God" (*Apoc. 8:3-4*).

But if the saints (and angels<sup>2</sup>) in heaven are offering our prayers to God, then they must be aware of our prayers. They are aware of our petitions and present them to God by interceding for us.

Some might try to argue that in this passage the prayers being offered were not addressed to the saints in heaven, but directly to God. Yet this argument would only strengthen the fact that those in heaven can hear our prayers, for then the saints would be aware of our prayers even when they are not directed to them!

Looking at the Second Book of Maccabees we find an even more explicit example of intercession by departed and glorified Saints: *II Maccabees 15:12-16* tells of a vision Judas Maccabeus has, in which he sees both Onias (a former high priest who had died) and Jeremiah the prophet (who had died over 500 years earlier) interceding, or mediating, for Israel. This passage of Scripture clearly shows us that departed Saints make intercession for those of us on earth who live their

life in faith.

In closing, let us quote St. Paul's words: "Love never fails... Now we see but a poor reflection as in a mirror; *then we shall see face to face*. Now I know in part; *then I shall know fully*, even as I am fully known" (*I Cor 13:8-12*).

St. Gregory remarks: "What can we not know when we know Him who knows all things, and whom all things exist" (Dialogues 6, iv, #24).

St. Thomas Aquinas teaches that the knowledge and concerns of earth are "revealed" to the deceased souls, either by their vision of God, or by "any other means" (*Summa Theologica, I, Q. 72, Art. 1, ad 5*). He is referring to the fact that by God's power the saints are made aware. Hence, each request made to a saint to pray for a specific petition on earth is made known to them by God Himself. Saints enjoy this privilege of direct communication with God because they are with Him in heaven, just as they enjoy many other privileges in heaven that we do not enjoy on earth.

## IDOLATRY IS CONDEMNED IN SCRIPTURE

### Saints equal to God?

Protestants argue that Catholics commit the sin of idolatry by worshipping the saints.

We are explicitly commanded at numerous points in the Bible to honor certain people:

"Honor your father and your mother, that your days may be long in the land which the Lord your God gives you" (*Ex. 20:12*. See also *Lev. 19:3, Deut. 5:16, Mt 15:4, Lk 18:20, and Eph. 6:2-3*).

"You shall rise up before the hoary head, and honor the face of an old man, and you shall fear your God: I am the Lord" (*Lev. 19:32*).

"Make sacred garments for your brother Aaron [the high priest], to give him dignity and honor" (*Ex. 28:2*).

"Bathsheba bowed, and did obedience unto the king [David]" (*I Kings 1:16*).

No one would accuse these of worshipping others as gods.

Consider how honor is given in society. We regularly give it to public officials. It is customary to address a judge as "Your Honor". In the marriage ceremony it used to be said that the wife would "love, honor, and obey" her husband. Letters to legislators are addressed to "The Honorable So-and-So". And just about anyone, living or dead, who bears an exalted rank is said to be worthy of honor, and this is particularly true of historical figures.

If there can be nothing wrong with honoring the living, who still have an opportunity to ruin their lives through sin, there certainly can be no argument against giving honor to saints whose lives are done and who ended them in sanctity. If people should be honored in general, God's special friends certainly should be honored.

As the terminology of Christian theology developed, the Greek term *latría*<sup>3</sup> came to be used to refer to the *adoration* that is due to God alone, and the term *dulia* came to refer to the *honor* or *veneration* that is due to those human beings who lived and died in God's friendship – in other words, the saints. Thus, Catholics sometimes say: "We *adore* God but we *honor* His saints".

A special term was coined to refer to the special honor given to the Virgin Mary, who bore Jesus – God in the flesh – in her womb. This term, *hyperdulia*, indicates that the honor due to her as Christ's own Mother is beyond the *dulia* given to other saints. It is greater in degree but still of the same kind. However, since Mary is a finite creature, the honor she is due is fundamentally different in kind from the *latría* owed only to the infinite Creator.

### Statue Worship?

Protestants say that Catholics worship statues.

Not only is this untrue, it is even untrue that Catholics honor statues. After all, a statue is nothing but a carved block of marble or a chunk of plaster, and no one gives honor to marble yet unquarried or to plaster still in the mixing bowl.

The fact that someone kneels before a statue to pray does not mean that he is praying *to* the statue, just as the fact that someone kneels with a Bible in his hands to pray does not mean that he is worshipping the Bible. Statues or paintings or

other artistic devices are used to recall to the mind the person or thing depicted. Just as it is easier to remember one's mother by looking at her photograph, so it is easier to recall the lives of the saints by looking at representations of them.

The use of statues and icons for liturgical purposes (as opposed to idols) also had a place in the Old Testament. In *Exodus 25:18–20*, God commanded: “And you shall make two cherubim of gold; of hammered work shall you make them, on the two ends of the mercy seat. Make one cherub on the one end, and one cherub on the other end; of one piece with the mercy seat shall you make the cherubim on its two ends. The cherubim shall spread out their wings above, overshadowing the mercy seat with their wings, their faces one to another; toward the mercy seat shall the faces of the cherubim be”. Such representations of things non-divine were used, and at the command of God. Again, there is a vast difference between making an artificial image of God and worshipping it, as opposed to representations of God as aids to spiritual truths, aids that even God Himself commands to be made.

In *Numbers 21:8–9*, God told Moses: “Make a fiery serpent, and set it on a pole; and every one who is bitten, when he sees it, shall live’. So Moses made a bronze serpent, and set it on a pole; and if a serpent bit any man, he would look at the bronze serpent and live”. This shows the actual ceremonial use of a statue (looking to it) in order to receive a blessing from God (healing from snakebite). In *John 3:14*, Jesus tells us that He Himself is what the bronze serpent represented, so it was a symbolic representation of Jesus. There was no problem with this statue – God had commanded it to be made – so long as people did not worship it. Yes, God commanded the destruction of the bronze serpent, but only after it had come to be worshipped; it had been preserved for about 800 years before this. Once again, the problem was not with the statue, but with the worship of it. This clearly shows the difference between the proper religious use of statues and idolatry.

Jesus Himself is “the *image*<sup>4</sup> of the invisible God” (*Col. 1:15*). Before the Incarnation, God could not be represented by an image. He was incomprehensible and invisible. But now He has become incarnate, and as such, He has opened up an entirely new economy of images not only of God, but of man as partakers of the divine nature through our union with Him (see *II Peter 1:2–4, I Jn 3:2*).

Protestants object that Origen, Athenagoras, Lactantius, Tertullian and Arnobius condemned the pagans for bowings before images as an act of worship.

In fact, these Fathers are not speaking only about worship to God or a false god, not to non-gods. And St. Irenaeus, who condemns the Gnostics for honoring these images the same way the Gentiles honor their pagan images is not saying that images themselves are evil. From the context of *Against Heresies* (chapters 20–26), he is saying that it is a contradiction for groups such as the Gnostics, who deny almost every doctrine of Christ and Christianity, to be carrying an image of Christ. Why carry an image of Christ if you deny everything that He taught?

### **Veneration of the Relics of the Saints**

Brewer claims that “there is nothing in the Bible that supports the veneration of relics, even if they are genuine”.

Again, not so.

One of the most moving accounts of the veneration of relics is that of the very body of Christ itself. Rather than leaving his body on the cross, to be taken down and disposed of by the Romans (as was the customary practice), Joseph of Arimathea courageously interceded with Pilate for Christ's body (*Mk 15:43, Jn 19:38*). He donated his own, newly hewn tomb as Christ's resting place (*Mt 27:60*). Nicodemus came and donated over a hundred pounds of spices to wrap inside Jesus' grave clothes (*Jn 19:39*), that amount of spices being used only for the most honored dead. And after he was buried, the women went to reverently visit the tomb (*Mt 28:1*) and to further anoint Christ's body with spices even though it had already been sealed inside the tomb (*Mk 16:1, Lk 24:1*). These acts of reverence were more than just the usual courtesy shown to the remains of the dead; they were special respect shown to the body of a most holy man - in this case, the holiest man who has ever lived, for He was God Incarnate. The Catholic Church has preserved with much honor relics of the Passion of Christ, such as the Holy Shroud of Turin.

The Church doesn't say there is some magical power in relics. There is nothing in them, whether a bone of the apostle Peter or water from Lourdes, that has any curative ability. The Church just says that relics may be the occasion of God's

miracles<sup>5</sup>, and in this She follows Scripture: “So Eliseus died, and they buried him. Now bands of Moabites used to invade the land in the spring of the year. And as a man was being buried, lo, a marauding band was seen and the man was cast into the grave of Eliseus; and as soon as the man touched the bones of Eliseus, he revived, and stood on his feet” (*II Kgs. 13:20-21*). This is an unequivocal biblical example of a miracle being performed by God through contact with the relics of a saint!

Similar are the cases of the woman cured of a hemorrhage by touching the hem of Christ’s cloak (*Mt 9:20-22*) and the sick who were healed when Peter’s shadow passed over them (*Acts 5:14-16*) as well as the following: “God did extraordinary miracles by the hands of Paul, so that handkerchiefs or aprons were carried away from his body to the sick, and diseases left them and the evil spirits came out of them” (*Acts 19:11-12*). If these aren’t biblical examples of the use of relics, what are?

Moreover, the veneration of relics is seen explicitly as early as the account of Polycarp’s martyrdom written by the Smyrnaeans in A.D. 156. In it, the Christians describe the events following his burning at the stake: “We took up his bones, which are more valuable than precious stones and finer than refined gold, and laid them in a suitable place, where the Lord will permit us to gather ourselves together, as we are able, in gladness and joy and to celebrate the birthday of his martyrdom”.

Let us therefore pray devoutly to the saints and venerate their images and relics!

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1. As part of their eternal reward in heaven Saints are perfected and glorified and are given nations to judge and rule over (*Wisdom 3:1*) just like the Prophet Jeremiah was given power to rule over and intercede for Israel in *II Maccabees 15:14-15*.
  2. These are the words of the archangel Raphael : “When you prayed with tears and buried the dead..., *I offered your prayers to the Lord*” (*Tobias 12:12*).
  3. “Latria”, according to the New Testament, is only used for God or false gods.
  4. “Eikon”, in Greek, which gave our English word: “icon”.
  5. Weren’t the bodies of the saints “the temples of the Holy Ghost”? (*I Cor. 3:16-17; 6:19-20*).

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